

Crossing the Bridge with Theater Games

By Cyndi Turtledove (Mexico)

Having used theater techniques as training tools for teachers for so many years, I have noticed that there is sometimes a fear of the words theater and drama. Some students and teachers feel that there is something sacred about those words and what they seem to represent. They will have to perform-they will have to be clever-they will be exposed. If the fear level is high in your class (or with you as a teacher), forget the words theater or drama and instead use simulating reality!

If a teacher says “We are going to do a game where we simulate a real-life situation” instead of saying “We are now going to do a theater game” or “We are now going to do some drama,” the fear is usually removed.

Nearly every English textbook has dialogues about real-life situations. However, when students read them, or even try to act them out, they are usually stilted and restricted. For example, there is a dialogue about a scene in an airport. Instead of using just what is in the book, try developing an improvisation using the same grammar structures and vocabulary that the lesson teaches. Students, or the teacher, can choose who they want to be: the ticket sellers, the baggage handlers, the hotel reservation clerks, the travelers, etc. They then choose what they are doing (the action), like carrying a suitcase, writing a receipt, making a phone call, losing their baggage or passport, etc. The location of the scene (where) is already dictated by the lesson in the book: at the airport.

In simulating real-life situations (doing theater games), students will begin to think in English without noticing it. Do not correct a student during one of these exercises-only afterwards.

In all language learning, you have to “cross the bridge” in order to feel really good about your progress. The bridge is the crossover between the left side of the brain and the right side, between the analytical/critical side and the creative side. Eventually, when a student is more advanced and has crossed over the bridge, he can use both sides of his brain at the same time; but at first, new learners are stuck on the analytical side and need to be coaxed, tricked, or blasted onto the creative side.

In learning English, the crossover also represents the difference between going slowly and worrying about grammar or vocabulary mistakes and going quickly-concentrating on the internal goal of each game without stopping to analyze or correct until afterwards. In short, thinking in English.

Action is the Key

In my 25 years of teaching, the use of physical action and movement has proved to be the best, quickest, and most fun way to cross the bridge. But don't forget that many students, as well as teachers, are conditioned to be afraid of “fun” and sometimes feel that they can't be learning if

they're having fun. Because of this, it is important that the teacher write down the structure of each game they will be doing, as well as the grammar and vocabulary that will be exercised during each activity. Depending on the age and level of the students, this information may be given to them in writing. Other times it can be saved just for the teacher or for administrators, who may have the same fear of fun.

More and more information has been published in the last few years about the effectiveness of "action" in learning. At the MEXTESOL National Conference in Guadalajara in October 1991 it was pointed out by Professor Dinorah de Pous that a student learns 10% of what he reads, 20% of what he hears, 30% of what he sees, 60% of what he sees and hears, 70% of what he reads, sees, and says, and a whopping 90% of what he says when he is doing an action. Action is the key to crossing the bridge.

It is important to remember that each language level has its own bridge. This means whether a student is at Level I or Level VI-whether he is a child or an adult-crossing the bridge must be done. If a student can do it in Level I, he will keep on doing it as he goes up each level. If he has reached an advanced level and still hasn't crossed the bridge into thinking in English-well, now is the time to cross it!

When trying to speak, most students have typical worries, like: What if my vocabulary or grammar isn't as good as his or hers? What if I can't think of anything to say? What if I can't find the proper word? What if I look silly or sound dumb? What if the teacher and everyone in the class is judging me? What if I'm judging everyone else? In short . . . what if I fail?

Well, it is your responsibility as the teacher to convince them that they cannot fail. If they try to keep their focus on the goal of each game activity, they cannot fail. As the teacher, you should try to keep their focus on the action of the game more than on the words. The words will come naturally as they cross over the bridge. What's the worst thing that can happen? Aside from refusing to do a game (which won't happen if the teacher is confident and enthusiastic), suppose they get frustrated and stutter and stop and have to do some mime or physical action to communicate what they want to say? Frequently another student will jump in and say the actual words they are trying to find (as in charades). Great! We all help each other, and everybody learns.

The Relationship of Moving to Speaking in Real Life

It is natural to move while speaking. It is natural to speak while moving. In real life, in our own native languages, if a second person is with us, probably 90% of the time everyone does some movement or actions at the same time that they are speaking. Think about it.

Let's say your action is "doing the dishes." If a second person is with you, you will be talking to him or her. You might be talking about what you are doing (the action) or you might be talking to him about something entirely different.

Because our bodies are moveable, and because we take them with us everywhere we go, some kind of action will almost always be linked with speech.

So I frequently find myself asking students: What is the action in this situation? What is he doing? What are you doing? What could you or he be doing? What action is logical to the situation? (Or if you want to try for humor: what action is illogical to the situation?) This also gets them thinking about actions instead of words, even though they are using words to describe the actions.

Actions can be small, medium-sized, or big. Actions are always the -ing form of a verb plus an object. Like painting a wall, rowing a boat, eating a hamburger, etc. They must be physical, and things like “listening,” “thinking,” “discussing,” etc., don’t count. In the world of theater, we call these actions “business,” and if you go to see a play that has good actions or “business” along with the dialogue, you are pleased and satisfied even though you may not know why. This is because actions and speaking go together naturally in real life. There is nothing new, mysterious, or magic about this idea. Deep down, everybody knows it. It does not take any special talent to connect actions to speaking, or vice versa. But it does take “crossing the bridge.” For some students that will be a giant leap. For others it will simply be a case of oozing gently over the bridge and hardly noticing it until afterwards.

Therefore, from the first class onwards, and from Level I upwards, all our teachers at ITESM speak only in English, and they act out and do mime for many explanations of things if the students don’t understand. They are not afraid to have fun. Fun does not mean disorganization. On the contrary, good fun is always highly organized. Everything is a balance of discipline and freedom-the strict, disciplined structure of a game activity and the freedom, creativity, and fun that develop within the structure.

Many, many students arrive at an advanced level of English where they can read, write, and listen effectively, but they are still afraid to speak. Usually this is because they have had teachers who were afraid to speak. (Pronunciation is another great fear, and there are many game activities that focus only on pronunciation.) We have students who are crossing the bridge and losing their fear of speaking at Level I-both children and adults. For other students, it takes longer-depending on their previous English-language training. Everything depends on the willingness of the teacher to experiment, to be open to trying new methods, to create new structures, and to be fearless about having fun. But crossing the bridge to thinking in English is well worth the effort!